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Recto Running Head: Fast Food

Verso Running Head: David Grumett, Luke Bretherton and Stephen R. Holmes

# Fast Food

## A Critical Theological Perspective

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### Abstract

Mass fast food pervades modern society. We here offer a critical theological appraisal of fast food and of the nexus of social values of which it is part. We assess its production and consumption within the doctrinal contexts of creation, fall and redemption, and identify tensions between fast food culture and theologically-formed approaches to food and eating. The continual availability of fast food, its homogeneity, and its dislocation from locally-shaped eating practices can all be seen as aspects of humankind's fallen state, and ultimately as signs of misdirected appetite. They contrast with the inculturated and social character of faithful eating, including with some other historic and present-day takeout cultures.

Keywords: creation, fall, fast food, globalization, redemption, takeout food

### Introduction

In recent years, global food consumption patterns have fundamentally shifted, with fast food outlets expanding rapidly from the Western world into the two-thirds world. The force of their impact has been so great that the concept of “McDonaldization” has been developed to describe wider global social processes of homogenization, rationalization and commodification.<sup>1</sup> Notwithstanding token concessions to local customs—such as, in McDonald's outlets in France, the use of moveable chairs instead of fixed seating in deference to café culture<sup>2</sup>—fast food is characterized by a uniform branding that stretches from Montana to Mombasa, Bolton to Beijing, and encompasses most urban centers in between. Locally-evolved, varied menus are being sidelined by a single set of options available globally.

Fast food can conveniently be regarded as a subset of takeout food. Takeout culture is, as we shall later see, not a new phenomenon, but a perennial feature of human society that has assumed a range of forms in different times and places, often serving real and legitimate needs. Historically, Christians have responded to takeout culture in different ways, but in the present day, developed Christian responses to fast food are surprisingly scarce. For a kosher Jew, in contrast, at least some fast food is clearly forbidden: a cheeseburger could never be kosher, being a mixture of milk and meat, and thus represents to an observant Jew the opposing imperatives of secular consumption and faithful eating.<sup>3</sup> The entire kitchen space in which a cheeseburger is prepared would, by extension, be called into question as a result of the absence of proper boundaries between the different food types within it, and the failure to reserve different spaces and sets of utensils for different purposes.

Why should we, as Christian theologians, be interested in the relationship between food and culture, and critically assessing modern Western food practices? It might be argued that we should remain focused on purely spiritual ideas and church issues rather than address aspects of the daily life of secular society. But Christianity is fundamentally the religion of the incarnation, in which God enters into the human world in human form. This makes everyday, embodied life the central location in which Christian belief is enacted and the key arena that Christian

theology addresses. Moreover, Christian theologians are called to promote principles such as justice and work–rest balance, for reasons that will be seen in detail as our discussion unfolds. They should not feel embarrassed about supporting countercultural food movements. Indeed, as we shall argue, they have distinctive resources to contribute to what Warren Belasco has rightly judged to be a frequently weak food counterculture, especially in terms of its limited wider social and political impacts beyond the food world.<sup>4</sup> Christian theologians should not therefore limit themselves merely to describing the role of food within Christian tradition. They are called to pose critical questions about the fittingness or otherwise of particular food practices, appropriate responses by Christians to those practices, and the changes in practice that might be desirable to promote human flourishing.

Christian theologians and ethicists have too often neglected concrete embodied practices in favor of more abstract approaches to doctrine, with everyday food and eating just one aspect of this neglect. In this article, we wish to take these as one specific site for critical engagement as part of a wider concern to redress this imbalance within theology between concrete and abstract approaches to doctrine. We do not, in other words, wish to cite fast food culture as the primary cause of present-day society's imagined or actual ills. Our aim, in contrast, is to employ that culture as a lens through which to view aspects of society, including churches, in its complexity and ambiguity.<sup>5</sup>

How might Christians recognize and assess the meanings and ethics of fast food using their own scriptures and associated traditions of interpretation and practice? These are not, of course, unrelated to Judaism, which as already noted has highly developed food rules. Jewish texts form the first part of the Christian scriptures. Moreover, Jesus was a Jew, as were many early Christians. This alone should provide food for thought. But adopting a more systematic theological approach, the Christian narrative can be divided into various loci, or topics, which provide a heuristic device for beginning to think about any given reality. These are creation, incarnation, redemption and eschatology.

In which of these should fast food be placed? One obvious approach to fast food would be via the Eucharist, a meal of bread and wine situated within the order of redemption. Yet although food has special significance within the order of redemption, it cannot be understood only through its redemptive significance. All food is certainly linked to the Eucharist, as thanksgiving properly precedes, accompanies and follows every act of eating. Yet in everyday acts of fellowship and feasting, bread may be broken without formal recollection of the fraction of Christ's body, and wine may be drunk that is not Christ's blood. In this discussion we wish to focus directly on just such mundane yet highly significant acts of everyday eating. We shall begin, therefore, by locating food within the created order. We shall then consider food within present cultural reality, which is fallen yet in process of redemption. Effecting this move from theology into culture will require us to draw increasingly on interdisciplinary resources as our argument proceeds.

## **“They Shall be Yours for Food”: Food in the Doctrine of Creation**

In the first Genesis creation account, God says to humankind:

Throughout the earth I give you all plants that bear seed, and every tree that bears fruit with seed: they shall be yours for food. All green plants I give for food to the wild animals, to all the birds of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, every living creature.<sup>6</sup>

God then surveys all that he has produced and recognizes its goodness. In the doctrine of creation, food is thus represented primarily as God's gift and blessing to his living creatures. All living creatures are given food, with animals and birds enjoying every green plant, and humans receiving all seed-yielding plants and every tree with seed in its fruit. The gift of living matter as food is good, being intrinsic to how creation is ordered as part of the ecology that God has called into being.

Here, then, is our first theological understanding of food. As with everything else necessary to human flourishing, it is a gift from God, a blessing given in the gracious act of creation. Food comes from God's hand in abundance and variety. It therefore provides many and varied pleasures, because God's riotous over-provision means not only that many sorts of foods are given to be eaten, but also that each species is different from every other. Food is, however, also limited—not in the sense that there is not enough to go round, but because some living things are not given for food. In the Garden of Eden, fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil is not food, despite being attractive and specifically described as edible.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, earlier in Genesis 1, meat seems not to be regarded as food, being entirely omitted from the list of abundant provision quoted above.<sup>8</sup>

This apparently vegetarian idyll does not, of course, last. Despite an expanded understanding of what may be consumed as food, many prohibitions remain, and the notion that not all possible items which could be eaten should in fact be regarded as food finds far more detailed definition in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. The meat of many animals, fish and birds is in these books presented as potentially clean provided that certain rules are followed. The basic doctrinal and ethical principle that food is a restricted category nevertheless remains, as evidenced by the establishment of those rules.

Before discussing the Mosaic covenant in greater depth, we must consider the Fall. In Genesis 3, although Adam and Eve are banished from Eden for an act of sinful eating, the created order is not destroyed. The goodness of God's gifts is not under threat, and his blessings are not withdrawn. The promises that humans will be provided with food are restated to Noah, with seedtime and harvest among the times and seasons that will never again cease after the floodwaters recede.<sup>9</sup> The command to be fruitful and multiply is restated, as is the gift to humanity of dominion over creation. But this new dominion will engender fear in all living creatures, because God now identifies them as food and allows humans to eat them.<sup>10</sup> This explicit permission granted to humans to consume living creatures is one of the signs that death has entered the world. Indeed, meat was presumably eaten immediately after the Fall, if this formed part of the process of animal sacrifice in which God favored the sacrificer Abel over his vegetarian brother Cain. The Noachide covenant makes clear, however, that life must still be respected. Being identified with blood, it must not be consumed.<sup>11</sup>

This assessment does not necessarily suppose a chronological passage from a vegetarian era to a new omnivorous age. It does, however, imply that meat-eating is associated with death, which is a result of sin, and should as such be permitted only within carefully-defined boundaries. This brings us to the most developed theology of food in Scripture: the purity regulations of Leviticus and Deuteronomy.<sup>12</sup> Through these, creation is reaffirmed as gift and as God's realm, and human freedom is established within a particular order set out in the regulations. Indiscriminate eating is, in contrast, an improper exercise of dominion over creation. It is a failure to recognize the world as God's good gift and humans' vocation as cultivators of that gift.

From the insight that life is the gift of God, various food regulations follow. These define clean and unclean animals, birds and fish by appearance and habitat.<sup>13</sup> They serve partly to distinguish Israel from her neighbors. The primary theological issue at stake was Israel's holiness in relation to God and her distinctiveness from other peoples, and by abstaining from some of their neighbors' foods, the Israelites demonstrate their separation from them. The rules about clean and unclean meats are not the only food regulations, however. There are also hospitality regulations. Tithing, for instance, can be understood as a command to be lavishly hospitable: giving up a proportion of one's possessions for the sake of others.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, other commandments require that hospitality be offered to aliens, strangers, widows and orphans. A farmer who harvests a field should not seek to maximize his harvest, but must leave the gleanings for the needy.<sup>15</sup> Linked to these commandments promoting generosity to others is the command that, in

the sabbath year, the land remain unsown.<sup>16</sup> In each case—the tithe, the gleanings and the sabbath year—a limit is imposed to remind the people that it is God’s good gifts they eat, and not the fruits of their own work. All these commandments are ways of acknowledging that to consume food is to participate in, and gratefully receive, the good gifts of God in creation.

To eat is always to enter into a realm that is not under human control or determination, and one that therefore requires structuring by rules or customs. It is therefore unsurprising that a basic form of the biblical dietary rules was imposed on the Gentile church by the Jerusalem Council: food with blood still in it—that is to say, with its life force remaining—should not be eaten.<sup>17</sup> This prohibition was not, of course, unproblematic, and 1 Corinthians 8–11:1 urges flexibility for the sake of Christian mission and community. But from the suggestion that rules should be applied flexibly it does not follow that they are superseded. Rather, the rules should be applied with an eye to wider social context and theological priorities such as mission, in which table fellowship was key. The New Testament witness does not therefore contradict our main arguments from the doctrine of creation: that the central gift of the living God is life, and that beings with life, although they might in principle be edible, are not necessarily permitted as food. Because flesh and also plants are part of the realm of life, to eat them without permission is to trespass into an arena that is intrinsically caught up in God’s creative and sustaining activity. Eating is therefore always an act to be undertaken with awe and thanksgiving.<sup>18</sup>

A careful distinction must be drawn, however. As Karl Barth notes, “life is no second God, and therefore the respect due to it cannot rival the reverence owed to God.”<sup>19</sup> Barth makes clear that the respect owed to life as good in itself has as its limitation the “will of God the Creator Himself who commands it, and the horizon which is set for man by the same God with his determination for eternal life.” Barth thus shows that there is a proper secularity to eating. To eat as God intends involves the transgression of some boundaries. Indeed, Barth makes clear elsewhere his disdain for modern vegetarianism, attributing it to sentimentality and even fanaticism.<sup>20</sup> It is, he implies, as if strict vegetarians ignore the fact that transgression is implicit in *every* act of eating, whether the object eaten is a cow, an insect or a carrot. The value of all potential foods derives primarily from their place in God’s creation, not from their intrinsic worth or desirability to diners, and is independent of human determination.

The association of gift with hospitality is apt: the appropriate way to respond to a gift is to share it generously with others. There is thus an intrinsic theological link between food and hospitality: the only thing we can rightly do with what we have been given is, in turn, to give. There is also a third term in this relationship: giving is proper to community, and in order to build community humans need to give. If food is a gift, particularly a divine gift, it is doctrinally necessary that food finds its proper context in hospitality, that is, in communal patterns of giving and receiving characterized by just generosity. As St. Benedict realized when instructing his monks to welcome all guests as if they were Jesus himself, it is in such patterns of sociality that humans bear fullest witness to the revelation of God’s self-giving nature.<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, to eat together is to enjoy communion through food, which fulfils the purpose of the items given by God for food. This brings us to food preparation and cooking. These are acts of “priesting” creation: properly human activities in which God’s good gifts are taken and in which they realize their God-given end. This is reflected in traditions surrounding the manufacture of the eucharistic bread. Palladius describes the hermit Candida rising at night to grind corn, lighting the oven and baking the bread for the morning worship, showing continuity between production and offering.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, in many Oriental Orthodox traditions, it is the grain that is brought to the church and offered, only

being made into bread in the church itself, often by priests.<sup>23</sup> Even in Britain, the Constitutions of Lanfranc required that the monks baking the eucharistic bread vest in albs and amices and sing psalms while undertaking their work.<sup>24</sup>

There is in every human reality a call for culture to grow and develop: “Fill the earth and subdue it” was the first benediction and command of God to human creatures. The idea that humankind should allow the world to remain in a supposedly natural state or seek to return to an imagined primitive idyll is therefore not Christian. In the case of those items graciously given to humans as food, proper preparation and transformation of the ingredients—which might include the humane and responsible killing of animals for meat—enables them to be healthful and not harmful, as God intends they should be. It allows the true wonder and goodness of what God has created to shine through, thus bringing forth praise and thanksgiving. Finally, as stated above, it offers opportunities for human solidarity and fellowship. These priestly acts are affirmed and fulfilled in the Eucharist: as the standard liturgies of the West remind us, Jesus did not take grain and grape, but the products of human labor and creativity, and used them to anticipate the coming eschatological fulfillment of all creation.<sup>25</sup> In daily life, Christians are called to participate in this creativity through cooking and otherwise preparing food, rather than depending for their home meals on brought-home takeouts from the fast food outlet or supermarket.

### **“Did God Really Say You Should Not Eat?” Fast Food and the Fall**

Having situated food, its preparation and acts of eating within the doctrine of creation as presented in **Scripture** and understood in Christian traditions of interpretation and practice, we now turn to consider one reality of modern eating: fast food. The designation of food as “fast” is emblematic of attitudes to food and eating in our late-modern Western culture, and inextricably linked with other features of society and culture, which we shall explore. If food is, as we have suggested, a primary means by which humans may receive God’s good blessings in creation and experience community with fellow humans, then an understanding of the particular social trends driving the fast food industry will furnish theological insights into some of the values of present-day society and culture.

What are the defining characteristics of fast food? Rather obviously, it is fast, available quickly at outlets situated so that such food is available within minutes of wherever one finds oneself in a large town or city.<sup>26</sup> This is not unique to fast food, however. In Britain, the traditional fish and chip shop is also ubiquitous, but does not offer fast food in the full sense of the term. It is often necessary to wait a few minutes while food is cooked to order. Moreover, although not always having seating, the traditional fish and chip shop has provided a form of community dining, being typically family-run and inclusive of genders and generations. Furthermore, its limited opening hours have demonstrated a recognition that meals should be taken during specific periods of the day.<sup>27</sup> At those times, by implication, eating should have priority over other activities.

In contrast with such independently-run community dining, fast food is homogeneous. This is its second characteristic. The Big Mac is a universal constant, sold in restaurants that are essentially identical to each other, given planning and architectural constraints. The burger weighs **45 grams** and measures **ten centimeters** in diameter.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, a Big Mac is not just available quickly and easily, but is designed to be eaten quickly and easily. Bap, pizza edge or taco shell is made to be held in the fingers so that knives, forks and even tables are not required. Fast food can be eaten anywhere, even in transit. Metal cutlery, especially knives, is admittedly regarded in some cultures, such as Chinese, as a mark of barbarism—its use at the table seen as akin to brandishing a weapon, in contrast with performing cutting operations away from the dining table as part of the food preparation process.<sup>29</sup> But in such cultures, food is presented to diners ready-prepared in small pieces, perhaps accompanied by small rough towels for cleaning the fingers.



Chopsticks are used in a similar context, as an “extension” of the fingers.<sup>30</sup> In food cultures where cutlery is not employed at the table, there is no suggestion that large food items will be bitten into whole.

Do the speed and homogeneity of fast food celebrate or undermine God’s good gift of food to his children? This question can be addressed by considering whether they promote gluttony, which is the sin of excessive or improper eating. Gluttony occurs whenever food is enjoyed as an end in itself rather than as a gift and blessing of God. Crucially, gluttony is not committed solely when food is consumed in excessive quantity. According to Thomas Aquinas, gluttony encompasses the eating of food that is too costly or exquisitely prepared. These are not, evidently, features of fast food. But Aquinas then proceeds, citing Gregory the Great and Isidore of Seville, to list what are two key characteristics of fast food culture: eating in the wrong way, and at the wrong time.<sup>31</sup> The brightly-lit interiors of many fast food outlets have served to encourage and even invite diners in, but where combined with uncomfortable fixed seating and a lack of soft furnishings to absorb ambient noise can cause them to eat quickly, or in the terminology of Aquinas, greedily. In order to dine with appropriate slowness, more is required, in other words, than a table and chairs. Furthermore, unlike the traditional fish and chip shop with restricted opening hours, fast food outlets provide food throughout the day and late into the night. They are inextricably part of a way of living which, under an illusion of fullness, tends towards fragmentation. Other features of this way of living include longer unsociable working hours and the consequent erosion of home life.

In the monastery, common dining in the refectory was fundamental to community life, and monastic rules are insistent that monks should not eat at any other time or in any other place. Evoking the eating by Adam and Eve of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Basil of Caesarea warns: “Beware of the sin of eating on the sly, even if it be a mere taste.”<sup>32</sup> The earliest monastic rule, that of Pachomius, legislates: “No one shall eat at all anything from field or orchard on his own before it has been served to all the brothers together.”<sup>33</sup> The Rule of Benedict, foundational for Western monasticism, instructs: “Let no one venture to take any food or drink before the appointed hour or afterwards.”<sup>34</sup> Communal eating at a set time was an opportunity to share the blessings of food and company. Solitary dining would, in contrast, be imposed as a punishment for refusing this blessing through persistent late arrival or early departure. In monastic tradition, a theology of blessing thus situates all acts of eating within an inalienably collective context. This suggests that food choices cannot be regarded as made by individual, isolated “consumers.” Rather, on any particular occasion, food is eaten in the context of prior, shared decisions and commitments about what kind of community and society the eater wishes to be part of.

In being blessed, a person, animal or plant is affirmed by God in the way most appropriate to its nature and future. There is no manipulation, subjugation or assimilation involved in the relationship. Instead, out of God’s abundance, gratuitous gifts are bestowed. The blessing is, in turn, offered back freely as thanksgiving and praise. This relationship of gift and reception is what Daniel Hardy and David Ford refer to as an “ecology of blessing.” They write:

Blessing is the comprehensive praise and thanks that returns all reality to God, and so lets all be taken up into the spiral of mutual appreciation and delight which is the fulfillment of creation. For the rabbis of Jesus’ time, to use anything of creation without blessing God was to rob God. Only the person receiving with thanks really received from God.”<sup>35</sup>

Gluttony is precisely the refusal to see food as a blessing from God. It is the objectification of food as either a source of fuel (“eating to live”) or a means of self-gratification (“living to eat”).<sup>36</sup> It is to ignore the proper restrictions placed on food by consuming items that should not be eaten, or to eat in ways that turn food against its proper good ends—such as digesting so much that sickness and lethargy result, rather than health and energy.

The concept of gluttony invites a focus primarily on the individual, but its wider cultural context is equally significant. The expectation of immediate provision that is key to fast food is part of a culture in which important aspects of what food should be are denied. In the cultural reality of fast food, the proper created limitations that apply to human life in general and to food in particular are refused. By promising immediate availability, and locating production stages away from the outlet whenever possible, the fast food industry presents to its customers an image of food available for consumption without work or waiting. But to work and to wait for good things—whether a family meal cooked at home, or a restaurant meal where a dish is ordered then prepared—is part of human life. The curse of the Fall is not work itself, but drudgery and toil. The fast food industry, with its routinized methods of food production, poor pay and low responsibility, promotes work that is rarely creative or fulfilling. Employee interactions with customers are scripted and occur within a highly predictable environment.<sup>37</sup> These methods are not in accord with God's intention for humans, but are a fallen form of work characterized by a lack of respect by senior managers for workers, repetitive tasks, and the elimination of every opportunity for spontaneity or creativity.<sup>38</sup> Fast food outlets are, as such, part of a wider tendency towards the routinization of work which has also been evident in factories, offices and supermarkets, even at a time when many companies are now realizing the negative impact on performance and productivity of excessively restricting staff freedom.

In sharp contrast with the assumption in much of present-day society that each day is essentially the same as any other, Christian tradition conceives creation as possessing a proper rhythm defined by the lights in the sky, the succession of the seasons, and sabbath rest.<sup>39</sup> The prominence of sabbath observance in Christian scripture and tradition reflects the importance afforded to the role of temporal rhythms in human life. In most cultures, this rhythm has been established partly by mealtimes. The attempt to interrupt the cycles that meals generate without replacing them with anything else amounts to an attempt to live without order and without limit. Indeed, the fast food industry is symptomatic of a shift towards a twenty-four hour society in which work is perpetual.

This point requires further explication, as we are well aware that we could be seen as merely attempting to replicate bourgeois moral and dietary ideals.<sup>40</sup> We are not arguing that “three square meals a day” taken by a nuclear family in the privacy of their home is an everlasting part of the created order, still less that the curved plastic arches of McDonald's should be replaced by the pointed stone arches of the medieval refectory. We do, however, maintain that a pattern of eating which gives shape and rhythm to the day is rightly part of the created order. One could, following the example of monastic communities, find rhythm in set times of private prayer and corporate worship. Yet those societies in which fast food has become a significant cultural reality have tended to discern their rhythm using food, not prayer or worship. Anything that prevents the eating of food being a definite moment in the day, however brief, is therefore inimical in those societies to the living of life in accordance with the properly human and good patterns that are fundamental to creation.

The rhythm of each day is affected by this dissolution of structure and form. David Harvey notes that one of the features of present-day culture is “time-space compression” in which, through shifts in the means of production and expanded information flows, patterns of life that inhibit or stabilize increasingly volatile and ephemeral consumerism are dissolved.<sup>41</sup> The consequence of this loss of rhythm and structure is the subjugation of historically-oriented human life to the tyranny of the present, as well as increasing alienation from past and future. Attempts to differentiate and particularize the day, the week, the month and the year are lost, because nothing is left to give them shape. All that remains is a pattern of waking and sleeping in which the experienced present is not shaped by the remembered past or anticipated future, but forgotten.



As well as estranging eating from its temporal location, the fast food industry threatens the properly spatial nature of eating. In contrast to restaurants, which are places where food is eaten, or takeout food outlets, which supply food in a form that can be eaten at home, fast food outlets make eating a dislocated activity that, if not completed in the outlet itself, can be practiced in the street, on a bus, in a car or seminar room or at a desk. The dislocation of eating from a particular place is problematic because maintaining the locatedness of eating is key to preserving its properly social character.

We do not wish to claim that these displacements are entirely new, but rather that they are currently widespread and call for theological attention. More than a century ago, for instance, the Victorian social commentator Charles Manby Smith stated of London's pie shops: "There is not a chair, stool, or seat of any kind to be found within. No dallying is looked for, nor would it probably be allowed. "Pay for your pie, and go," seems the order of the day."<sup>42</sup> In this description, an earlier form of fast food also undermines the interrelationship between space and social interaction by discouraging the taking of time to eat, which properly marks out eating as an activity within God's economy. It is by no means the case that the problems of fast food are developments peculiar to the late twentieth century. Indeed, poor-quality meat was available from the cookhouses and street vendors of ancient Rome in forms such as blood pudding, forcemeat and sausages, while the boilshops of ancient Alexandria supplied tripe, intestine and tongue.<sup>43</sup> Yet despite easy, cheap availability, such products and ways of eating do not feature in hospitality narratives from these major Christian centers. Similar comments could be made about fast food in later periods, and Chaucer's pilgrims to Canterbury prudently decided to include a cook in their party rather than buy ready-prepared food of uncertain provenance and quality along the way.<sup>44</sup> Then, as now, Christians often felt called to embrace alternative forms of eating.

Fast food is unable to deliver the freedoms it purports to offer because those freedoms are unattainable. The doctrine of creation teaches that human life and food are both the good gifts of God. This means that there are rhythms to our lives and food practices that are not ours to choose or dispose of. Alongside this grasping for an unattainable freedom in fast food is, paradoxically, a denial of freedoms that are legitimate. Although advertising rhetoric speaks of diversity and choice ("You got it your way at BK"), choice is tightly restricted, being limited to a few global brands and to the few types of food amenable to rapid, uniform production. In fast food culture, the proper freedoms of diversity and particularity are denied. The freedom of a locality, region or nation to be itself, possessing and celebrating (within proper limits) its unique and particular culture, is denied. A Big Mac bought on the Champs Élysées owes nothing to the cultural tradition of the person who grilled it or to regional or national French cuisine.

The range of dishes on offer as part of a classic takeout reflects, in contrast, a drawing together of diverse regional cuisines. For example, no one in China would recognize "Chinese" cuisine as an identifiable unit. In the British case, some dishes are purposeful accommodations of particular diverse traditions of cooking to national ingredients and tastes, famously chicken tikka masala and hot meaty curries like madras. Classic Indian curries would have made little use of meat and none of chili, which was a Portuguese import from South America.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, "curry" itself designates a generic category under which the British, while in India, subsumed a vast range of different dishes.<sup>46</sup> Whatever the culinary rights or wrongs of such transformations, they reflect rather well the culture of immigrant communities in Britain, among whom regional distinctions are often blurred and a measure of cultural assimilation takes place. One cuisine that celebrates this phenomenon by turning it into an art is "fusion" or "Pacific Rim" cuisine. This form of cooking originated in the mixing of different European and Southeast Asian cuisines through the interaction of different immigrant communities in Australia and down the American West Coast. Such cuisine preserves proper

cultural particularity, reflecting and contributing to the complex range of cultural commitments and influences on both chefs and diners.

The contrasting enforced homogeneity of fast food denies food's cultural locatedness. That this is bad can be seen not so much from the creation narratives of Scripture—even if the scattering and linguistic confusion following the collapse of the Tower of Babel are read as gracious and recreative acts<sup>47</sup>—but from the affirmation of cultural particularity given in the incarnation and at Pentecost. Jesus' incarnation in a particular time and place is central to understanding how humans may know God. Furthermore, at Pentecost the assembled people do not all hear the Word of God in its original language (Hebrew), but are empowered to give that Word life in every language under heaven. That is to say, although the gospel is good news for all people, it is only properly heard in the dialect of each particular people. In the incarnation and at Pentecost, cultural particularity is revealed to be a good and necessary dimension of God's relation to humans. The affirmation given in these actions of Jesus and the Holy Spirit is underlined in the picture of the final redemption of all things. There will then be a “vast throng, which no one could count, from all races and tribes, nations and languages” proclaiming the victory.<sup>48</sup> Even the prophets of Israel foretold the day when all people would come to Jerusalem to worship God not as adopted Jews, but as members of their own nations.<sup>49</sup> The varied and particular national cultures matter, and are not to be ignored or removed in premature attempts to anticipate God's final transformation of the world.<sup>50</sup>

Furthermore, the created patterns of springtime and harvest, fast and feast, workday and sabbath contain within them a pattern of hope and fulfillment which is an image, or even type, of the coming End.<sup>51</sup> This is why, in Christian countries, these patterns have been sanctified by the Church's own liturgical year.<sup>52</sup> But fast food allows no room for this cycle of hopeful anticipation and joyful fulfillment. “Hungry—why wait?” can be used as a rhetorical question by advertisers within a culture that is increasingly taught its eating habits and thereby other mores by the purveyors of fast food. Such a culture sees no virtue in anticipation and hope, or in longing and waiting.

This point is clearest when we consider the spiritual discipline of fasting and what its place might be in a culture in which fast food is emblematic of the dominant approach to life. To fast is to recognize that, until the end of the world, human life will never be without desire. “You have made us for yourself,” prayed Augustine, “and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.”<sup>53</sup> How should humans respond to their incurably restless, desiring hearts? If they have learnt wisdom from the gospel, they should seek God above all else, and trust that everything else will follow in its proper place. Fasting is a means by which desire is trained and directed to seek and wait for that which truly fulfils and nourishes. In fasting, humans learn that although they may be worried about and afflicted by many things, it is in reality God's love for which they should long because God alone is good in himself.<sup>54</sup> The Christian account of the proper ordering of human life suggests that any attempt to satisfy desires fully in this life is inevitably a rejection of God's gifts.

For Christians to seek to still their restless hearts with anything other than the love of God, and thereby to relinquish hope for the true feast, is idolatry. Such idolatry is manifested in the ever-greater promises made by the fast food industry to satisfy every desire instantaneously, to offer ever-larger portions ever more quickly, to top the pizza right to the edge, or to “super-size” a meal that already contains a “Whopper”—all this is, rightly diagnosed, a running after idols and an illusion of plenty and satiety. The abundance offered is illusory firstly because of the presentation of the products. Most obviously, a Big Mac burger measures a centimeter more in diameter than the bun, and fries are packaged in a container shaped so that it apparently overflows.<sup>55</sup> In fact, portions are smaller than they appear and than their price suggests. Theologically, this attempt to manipulate the appearance of created things to make them seem more

fulfilling than they are amounts to the construction of an idol—which, as such, cannot satisfy the desires which construct it.

This culture of illusory abundance can be resisted by asceticism. This is a key practice by which Christians have cultivated virtuous lives. In the words of St. Benedict, “hearts and bodies must be made ready to fight under the holy obedience of [God’s] commands.”<sup>56</sup> Such faithful obedience is achieved by means of a whole armory of ascetic disciplines by which Christians may, continuing to quote Benedict, “progress in this way of life and in faith” so that they may “run on the path of God’s commandments” with “hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love.” The fruit of asceticism is not the repression of some abstract, pre-social, “natural” self but the formation of a truly compassionate and just person who overflows in the “delight of love.” Timothy Gorringer draws attention to the importance of developing ascetic practices in the present day. He states:

Serving God is the way to find out how to liberate our truest and deepest desires, says the Christian tradition, but this liberation involves an ongoing education of the senses. What is needed is a movement for the liberation of all forms of desire, including *eros*, from the tyranny of consumerism. We have to find ways of living which protest the commodification of the body whilst honouring what the creator has given us.<sup>57</sup>

To be drawn into fast food culture, however, is to give oneself over to consumerist patterns of desire rather than allowing oneself to be shaped by the love of God. Fast food is intrinsic to modern consumerism, socializing humans into patterns of life that sit too comfortably alongside the idea that consumption is a truly fulfilling activity. It exposes what, in the terms of Hannah Arendt’s thesis on Augustine’s concept of love, is the cupidity of consumer society, in which desire for immutable, divine truths transmutes into a sinful appetite for inferior, perishable goods, which when enjoyed are necessarily annihilated.<sup>58</sup> Fast food lends to such false promises a sheen of plausibility. Ascetic restraint, in contrast, promotes resistance to the false allure of instant gratification.

### **“Happy Are Those Who Will Sit at the Feast”: Eating as Redemption**

How might food practices contribute to the redemption of humanity and the world? Food and eating provide good images for reflecting on the Christian promise of redemption, because this is truest when resolutely this-worldly and material. John recounts: “I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, *coming down out of heaven*.”<sup>59</sup> Moreover, the Apostles’ Creed and 1 Corinthians 15 call Christians to believe in the resurrection of the *body*, not merely of some immortal and immaterial soul. Food, being a thoroughly carnal and mundane reality, should therefore feature prominently in any properly Christian picture of the final redemption and of ways in which this might be anticipated legitimately in present-day life. What might redeemed food practices look like?

First, everybody will eat and be satisfied. In one of the most beautiful pictures of redemption in Scripture, everyone will sit under their own grapevine and fig tree.<sup>60</sup> It might, of course, be argued that fast food is actually a democratic movement, which makes luxuries widely available, and so a proper prefiguring of this promise: whereas beef was once the preserve of the aristocracy and yeomanry, it is now available to anyone regardless of income or status.<sup>61</sup> This argument is flawed for two reasons. First, it is economically untrue: in New Delhi or Kolkata, a Big Mac costs a day’s wages and is a status symbol.<sup>62</sup> Secondly, even in relation to wealthy Western societies the claim is false. Beef, which can be treasured for its rich, complex flavors and fine textures, becomes in fast food burgers bland and corrupted, with sauces and pickles needed to impart to it any flavor.

Some antecedents of fast food provided good nutrition to undernourished workers, and could therefore be regarded as partial yet proper anticipations of God’s final blessing. The stalls and mobile street vendors of medieval

London and its later Victorian urban sprawl purveyed a wide range of takeout items such as soup, potatoes, pies, shellfish, eels, fried fish, cakes, tarts, fruits, watercress and coffee. They thereby played a central role in feeding people occupying overcrowded homes with limited cooking facilities, and in the later period to sustaining deracinated industrial workers subjected to long working hours.<sup>63</sup> In New York, the ubiquitous oyster was a staple food of the poor until rendered extinct by pollution, being sold on stalls throughout the city.<sup>64</sup> But modern fast food too often delivers insubstantial meals of low nutritional value to overfed but still undernourished people, despite purporting to do otherwise. People from lower socioeconomic groups are more likely to consume fast food than members of higher income groups. Consumption of fast food, obesity, and deaths from heart disease are linked indicators of the failures of consumerism to meet true needs among even the poorest in its own society, let alone the poor and oppressed across the world.<sup>65</sup>

The messianic banquet points to the properly social nature of true eating, founded as already argued on the status of food as a gift that is properly used in hospitality. Fast food is, in comparison, designed to be consumed in isolation, even if one is surrounded by other lone diners—while walking, driving or on public transport—and to be consumed quickly. Both these deny the possibility that dining is an occasion for meaningful social or familial interaction. Fast food removes possibilities for creating welcome and peace, and so prevents proper anticipations of life in the kingdom of God.

Jesus ate with Zaccheus, a tax collector and sinner. Various onlookers, rightly relating eating to holiness, were scandalized. But as bread was broken and wine poured out, Zaccheus was moved to respond to the action of Jesus, who affirmed that salvation had that day come to his house.<sup>66</sup> In such ways as this, eating practices might become occasions of redemptive hospitality and renewal for both church and society. Eating is not theologically neutral. On the contrary, it is intrinsically related to holiness, that is, to Christians' relationships with God and each other. In particular, food and the practices associated with it are means of committal to specific patterns of life. In present-day Western culture, to consume fast food is to be consumed by particular cultural values. Christians are called to resist some of these. If, as we have argued, eating is an activity pertaining to holiness, then this resistance will become a basic form of discipleship that inaugurates an alternative social and political ethic.

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## Endnotes

- 1 George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* (Los Angeles, CA: Pine Forge, 2008 [1993]). We do not ourselves wish to single out McDonald's for special criticism, or suggest that all fast food outlets are identical. Because the chain led the way in pioneering mass fast food, however, sociological critiques of fast food and the terminology associated with those critiques have focused on McDonald's more often than on other chains.
- 2 Rick Fantasia, "Fast Food in France," *Theory and Society* 24 (1995), pp. 201–43 (see p. 225).
- 3 Exod. 23:19b; 34:26b; Debra Shostak, "An Appetite for America: Philip Roth's Antipastorals," in Etta M. Madden and Martha L. Finch (eds) *Eating in Eden: Food and American Utopias* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), pp. 74–88 (see p. 77).
- 4 Warren Belasco, *Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture took on the Food Industry* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2nd edn, 2007).
- 5 We concur with many of the criticisms of recent trends in church practices in John Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church: Consumer Culture and the Church's Future* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000).
- 6 Gen. 1:29–30.
- 7 Gen. 3:6.
- 8 Stephen Webb, *Good Eating: The Bible, Diet and the Proper Love of Animals* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2001), pp. 59–74.
- 9 Gen. 8:22.
- 10 Gen. 9:2; cf. 1:28.
- 11 Gen. 4:2–4; 9:4; Calum M. Carmichael, "On Separating Life and Death: An Explanation of Some Biblical Laws," *The Harvard Theological Review* 69 (1976), pp. 1–7.
- 12 See especially Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 134–76.
- 13 Jean Soler, "The Semiotics of Food in the Bible," in Robert Forster and Orest Ranum (eds) *Food and Drink in History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), pp. 126–38.
- 14 Deut. 12:17–19.
- 15 Lev. 19:9; 23:22
- 16 Lev. 25:3–4.
- 17 Acts 15:29.
- 18 Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 2: The Creatures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 185.
- 19 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/4 (14 vols; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936–77), p. 342.
- 20 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/1, pp. 355–6.
- 21 *The Rule of St. Benedict* 53 (London: Sheed & Ward, 1989), p. 57; also John Cassian, *Institutes* 5.24 (trans. Boniface Ramsey; Mahwah, NJ: Newman, 2000), pp. 132–3. For a fully developed theological account of hospitality along these lines see Luke Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness: Christian Witness Amid Moral Diversity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).
- 22 *The Lausiac History of Palladius*, trans. W.K. Lowther Clarke (London: SPCK, 1918), p. 162.
- 23 Cérés Wissa-Wassef, *Pratiques rituelles et alimentaires des coptes* (Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale du Caire, 1971), p. 107; Archdale A. King, *Rites of Eastern Christendom* (2 vols; Rome: Catholic Book Agency, 1947–8), Vol. 1, pp. 104–5, 250–1; Vol. 2, pp. 306, 471.
- 24 Reginald Maxwell Woolley, *The Bread of the Eucharist* (London: Mowbray, 1913), pp. 31–2.
- 25 Luke 22:16, 19.
- 26 See Stephen Happel, "Communion with Fast Food: The Spirituality of Work and Sacrament," *The Way* 37.1 (1997), pp. 3–16 (see p. 6).
- 27 John K. Walton, *Fish & Chips and the British Working Class, 1870–1940* (London: Leicester University Press, 2000), pp. 14–16.
- 28 Ritzer, *McDonaldization*, p. 79.
- 29 Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, rev edn, 2000), pp. 103, 107.
- 30 Margaret Visser, *Rituals of Dinner: The Origins, Evolution, Eccentricities and Meaning of Table Manners* (London: Viking, 1992), p. 179.
- 31 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* IIaIIae, q. 148, a. 4 (61 vols; London: Blackfriars, 1963–81), Vol. 43, pp. 124–5. See generally Dennis Okholm, "Gluttony: Thought for Food," *American Benedictine Review* 49 (1998), pp. 33–59; William Ian Miller, "Gluttony," *Representations* 60 (1997), pp. 92–112.
- 32 Basil of Caesarea, "De Renuntiatione Saeculi" 209a, in W.K.L. Clarke (ed.) *The Ascetic Works* (London: SPCK, 1925), pp. 68–9.
- 33 "The Rules of Saint Pachomius" 73, in Armand Veilleux (ed.) *Pachomian Koinonia 2: Pachomian Chronicles and Rules* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1981), p. 158.
- 34 *Rule of St. Benedict* 43, p. 50.
- 35 Daniel W. Hardy and David F. Ford, *Praising and Knowing God* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1984), pp. 81–2.
- 36 As Aquinas notes, not all desire for food is gluttony, but only inordinate desire (*Summa Theologiae* IIaIIae, q. 148, a.1, r., pp. 118–19). That is to say, the movement from the delight of the *gourmand* to the excess and gluttony of the *gross gourmand* might be fine, but still exists.
- 37 Ritzer, *McDonaldization*, pp. 88–94.
- 38 Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation: What the All-American Meal is Doing to the World* (London: Penguin, 2001), pp. 71–5, records that at a 1999 conference on food-servicing equipment, top executives from Burger King, McDonald's and Tricon Global Restaurants agreed that the industry's aim was to design its machines so that employees need "zero training."



39 Gen. 1:14–18; 2:1–3; 8:22. The pattern of “evening and morning” repeated through Gen. 1 indicates the same point.

40 On which, see John R. Gillis, *A World of their Own Making: Myth, Ritual and the Quest for Family Values* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

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44 Martha Carlin, “Fast Food and Urban Living Standards in Medieval England,” in Martha Carlin and Joel T. Rosenthal (eds) *Food and Eating in Medieval Europe* (London: Hambledon, 1998), pp. 27–51 (see pp. 32–40).

45 Lizzie Collingham, *Curry: A Biography* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2005), pp. 46–73.

46 Collingham, *Curry*, pp. 1–12, 107–28.

47 Gen. 11:6–9.

48 Rev. 7:9–10.

49 Zech. 8:20–3.

50 On fast food as a vehicle for cultural homogenization see Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation*, pp. 229–34; also Benjamin Barber, *Jihad vs McWorld* (New York: Times Books, 1995), p. 17.

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52 Ronald Hutton, *Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

53 Augustine, *Confessions* 1.1, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 3.

54 Augustine, “On Man’s Perfection in Righteousness” 32, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* I.5 (28 vols; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), pp. 170–1.

55 Ritzer, *McDonaldization*, p. 77.

56 *Rule of St. Benedict*, prologue, p. 3.

57 Timothy Gorringer, *The Education of Desire: Towards a Theology of the Senses* (London: SCM, 2001), p. 100.

58 David Grumett, “Arendt, Augustine and Evil,” *The Heythrop Journal* 41 (2000), pp. 154–69 (see pp. 155–6, 160–1).

59 Rev. 21:2.

60 Mic. 4:4.

61 For this history, see Ben Rogers, *Beef and Liberty: Roast Beef, John Bull and the English Nation* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2003).

62 Similarly in France until the 1980s, hamburgers were confined to upmarket restaurants. Fantasia, “Fast Food,” p. 225.

63 Carlin, “Fast Food,” pp. 40–51; Judy Spours, *Cakes and Ale: The Golden Age of British Feasting* (Kew: National Archives, 2006), pp. 90–100.

64 Mark Kurlansky, *The Big Oyster: History on the Half Shell* (New York: Ballantine, 2006), pp. 194–6.

65 For analysis of the link between fast food and obesity in Great Britain and elsewhere, see Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation*, pp. 239–43.

66 Luke 19:9.